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AN SKETCH
OF
THE LIFE AND SERVICES
OF
Francis W. Pickens,
OF
SOUTH CAROLINA.

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Francis W. Pickens.

Born Feb. 1804

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THE name of PICKENS is historical in South Carolina. For three generations it has held prominent station in the roll of her public men. Andrew Pickens, the elder, was a worthy compeer of the great Whig chieftains of the revolution; and with the "Game Cock" Sumter, and the "Swamp Fox" Marion, composed that famous trio of the partisan leaders of the unpaid gentlemen of Carolina, whose fame will always live in "song and story," in the old Palmetto State, whatever complexion her destiny may assume. His conquest of the Cherokees, the wound in the breast which he received in the thickest of the fight at Eutaw, and his gallant services at the hard-fought battle of the Cowpens, for which Congress voted him a sword, would be kept alive by tradition, even were they not indelibly impressed on the brightest pages of the Southern chapters of the history of that great struggle. He was a general in the war of the revolution, was subsequently elected to Congress, declined a re-election, and was after-

wards solicited to accept the office of Governor of the State, which he also declined.

His son, Andrew Pickens, the younger, was also distinguished, both in military and civil life. In the war of 1812, our second war of independence, as it has been not inaptly termed, he was Colonel of the 10th Regiment United States Regulars, stationed on the Canada frontier, and was afterwards appointed to the command of one of the two regiments raised by the State for the defence of Charleston in 1814. Upon the return of peace, he was, in 1816, elected one of that long line of illustrious Governors of South Carolina—the choice of the white men of the State—which commenced in 1775 with John Rutledge.

His son, Francis W. Pickens, more widely known than either sire or grandsire—more widely known, indeed, on the day of his death than any living Carolinian, after high offices held in times of feverish excitement, and a long and eventful public career passed amid the storms of State—has but lately breathed his last, at the family seat of Edgewood, amid the endearments of domestic life, and with children's faces around his bed, but leaving no heir male to transmit to after generations the name which has been so long and so much honored in South Carolina.

The last Pickens, though his services as Aid to Governor Hayne in the stormy days of nullification, and his course as Governor of South Carolina in the first two years of the great civil war in America, gave no uncertain promise that, as were the sire and grandsire in military affairs, so would be the son, won his laurels in that civil arena for which he had evinced from boyhood a passionate proclivity.

“Politics,” says the last of the British premiers—a man who has perhaps lived more in and for the world of politics than any living statesman—“politics is a branch of study certainly the most delightful in the world, but for a boy as certainly the most pernicious.” Here we have followed the practice, rather than the theory, of Mr. D’Israeli; the highest goal of honorable ambition is to acquire great renown by great public services, and ambitious youth naturally aspire to political distinction.

Mr. Pickens’ early education was well adapted to form an orator and statesman. He was an earnest student of Aristotle, the most acute of human intellects, whom he justly considered the most profound of all who have treated of government; and throughout life was fond of tracing in modern authors, repeated, varied, and disguised, those fundamental

ideas of the science which the greatest of philosophers taught the greatest of conquerors. As in statesmanship his master was the founder of the science of politics, so in oratory his master was the greatest orator who ever spoke—

“Whose resistless eloquence
Wielded at will that fierce democratic,
Shook the arsenal and fulminated over Greece.”

So attached indeed was he to Demosthenes, that he could repeat in youth the whole of the transcendent oration on the Crown, and would often, in later life, quote striking passages of it with unaffected admiration.

Under the able tuition of his father, he studied and memorized Burke's great speeches on the taxation and conciliation of the colonies, Sheridan's famous Begum speech on the celebrated trial of Warren Hastings, and Lord Mansfield's ablest efforts in the House of Lords; and to these and the other bravuras of British oratory he constantly recurred with the greatest pleasure.

But his heart, like Legare's, was in the classics, and it might be truly said of him, in the beautiful language of a college friend, afterwards a congressional

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colleague and rival aspirant for high office, who had the same tastes with himself, that he “drank deep and drank often of the precious waters of those virgin fountains which were unlocked in Nature’s first known cycle.”

These studies, begun at home under the tuition and example of his father, were fostered and cultivated to the highest degree when he entered the South Carolina College,—long before and long afterward, the nursing mother of Southern statesmen and orators,—no unwilling or laggard pupil, but “conspicuous among the youths of high promise who sat at the feet” of the great teacher who then enunciated, with consummate ability and singular force, doctrines of political economy and the philosophy of government which took deep root in South Carolina. Thomas Cooper’s political life was one continued struggle against all forms of political tyranny and centralization; and lectures which, coming from the masters of cloistered colleges, might have been considered theoretical abstractions, became concrete realities, when life was breathed into them from the personal experience of the master “who had spoken history, acted history, lived history;” who had been prosecuted for his political course by the British

Crown and the administration of the elder Adams; who had canvassed the most excitable voters on earth in a contested race with *Egalite* Orleans for a seat in the convention during the carnival of the French revolution of 1789. And on no subject was Dr. Cooper's intellect more vigorously exercised than on the fundamental principles involving the relation which the States bore to the Federal Government of the American Union, and which underlay the distinction between that party which advocated a strong centralized national government, and that which advocated *the sovereignty of the States*—the sovereignty of the States, now scarce mentioned save in derision, except as we hear of it, after the ground swell of the great struggle of arms, in the exhaustive argument of Alexander Stephens, or a brief, vigorous letter from Barnwell Rhett, reminding us of the spirit and the days when *calida juvena* he wrote the Colleton address. Mr. Pickens' position on these great questions, and in the great struggle, first of opinions and then of arms to which they led, was taken then, early in life, while a college boy; and thenceforward, to the day of his death, he never swerved or wavered from that position; and though its armed adherents went to the wall, and its flag went down on the red field of battle,

“With not a man to wave it,
And not a sword to save it,”

though what he had regarded as sovereign States, among them his beloved Carolina, were given as provinces to pro-consuls, and the dire result of arms proclaimed that he and his great compeers would be portrayed in the colors of “The Gracchi of the Patricians, and not the Gracchi of the people,” he ever maintained the same position, through evil as well as good report, and denied to the last, as the great heroic mind ever has done and ever will do, “that might makes right.”

To him the abandonment of the doctrines and dogmas of the States Rights strict construction party would have been worse than political apostacy—it would have been sacrilege, for to him the sovereignty of the States was not an abstraction or a theory—it was a creed, a religion. So early and so deeply was he imbued with the principles of the States Rights party, that while in college he wrote seven articles under the signature of “Sydney” for the Charleston Mercury, then under the editorial auspices of the gifted Henry L. Pinckney. These articles took the highest ground, asserted the separate sovereignty of the States, their right in their sovereign capacity to

nullify an unconstitutional act of Congress, to relieve their citizens from its operation, and to open their ports in defiance of the restrictions of an unconstitutional and oppressive tariff. They excited the greatest interest, and their authorship was ascribed by the *National Intelligencer* of that day to a committee of distinguished Carolinians, supposed to consist of Hayne, McDuffie, and Hamilton.

He was admitted to the Bar in 1828, and was elected to the Lower House of the South Carolina Legislature in 1832, where his speeches elicited the warmest encomiums (despite their differences on the exciting topics discussed) from Hugh S. Legare, then Minister in Brussels; his first speech being made at the request of Wm. C. Preston, on the latter's resolutions responsive to Jackson's famous proclamation on the Nullification imbroglio. He soon became chairman of the Committee on Federal Relations, and of the Committee on the Judiciary; and in the former capacity made the well known report on the oath to be prescribed to officers, a subject which gave rise to so much excitement, politically and judicially.

In 1834, when twenty-six years of age, he was elected to Congress, as successor of Mr. McDuffie, without opposition, and at once took high rank from

a speech he delivered on our relations with France. A lady of wit and fashion at the Capital, who had been accustomed to hear his predecessor and the other great orators from his State, but who now heard Mr. Pickens for the first time, at the conclusion of his maiden speech in Congress, asked "if it were really true, that orators grew spontaneous in South Carolina."

He and Governor Hammond, then also a member of the House of Representatives, by concert, objected to the reception of abolition petitions, which the House had been receiving and referring to the Committee on the District of Columbia, and in January, 1836, he delivered, on Governor Wise's resolution on that subject, one of the first arguments ever made in Congress against the constitutional power of the government to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia, and forcibly portrayed the power of the abolitionists amid conflicting political parties, and the causes which would inevitably increase that power, and demonstrated that from holding the balance of power they would finally control the destinies of the government. "It is of no avail," said he "to close our eyes to passing events around us in this country and in Europe. Everything proclaims that, sooner or later, we shall have to meet the strong and the powerful, and contend

over the tombs of our fathers for our consecrated hearthstones and household gods, or abandon our country to become a black colony, and seek for ourselves a refuge in the wilderness of the West. It is in vain to avoid the contest." How significant are these predictions of 1836, when read by the light of the Presidential canvass of 1860, and the lurid glare of all that has followed in its wake!

His speech on the Fortification bill, in May, 1836, attracted much attention from the vigorous exposition of the real nature of the changes going on in the government, which he contended were virtual alterations of the nature of the government itself. At this day it has a high additional value from its predictions, since realized, as to the changes which would be produced in naval warfare by the application of steam power. During the same year he was among the first who advocated the independence of Texas, in opposition to the views expressed by Governor McDuffie, and others of the dominant party in South Carolina and elsewhere; and, in 1837, made one of the first speeches in Congress in favor of the independent treasury scheme.

A series of speeches delivered by him from this time to 1841, on the relation of the government ~~to~~ to

banks and the banking system, and on the subject of exchanges, excited wide-spread comment and admiration in the great commercial and financial centres of the Union, and may be read at this day with pleasure and profit. The report made by him as chairman of the Committee on Foreign Relations, in 1840, on the burning of the steamboat *Caroline*, and the demand made by the British Minister for McLeod, exhibited his views of our foreign relations, and created a sensation both here and in England.

He continued in Congress an active participant in all leading debates, till the 4th March, 1843, when he was elected to fill the unexpired term of Major Jeter in the State Senate.

He was a member of the State Convention of 1852, and drew its ordinance affirming the right of secession, reported by a committee composed of Chancellor Wardlaw, Robert W. Barnwell, and himself.

On the election of Mr. Buchanan to the Presidency, he accepted the mission to St. Petersburg, having previously declined the mission to France, tendered him by President Tyler, and the mission to England, tendered him by President Polk. During his residence as American Minister in St. Petersburg, he jealously guarded the honor and dignity of his country, and

vigilantly watched its interests, so far as these came or could come within the scope of his duties or powers, and the legation was the seat of an elegant hospitality, embellished by all that female grace and ingenuity could devise to remind American visitors to the ice-bound capital of all the Russias of the delights of our own more temperate clime.

But his heart, amid all the ostentation and gaiety of diplomatic life, was with his home and people in the sunny South; and the John Brown raid, the disruption of the Democratic party under the bold lead of Yancey, in which party Mr. Pickens had long thought was the last hope of a Constitutional Union, and the ^eincreasing excitement of domestic politics, admonished all who believed with him that their primary allegiance was due to their State and not to the Federal Government; that the prologue which had lasted for thirty years was hastening rapidly to its close; that the black curtain which had shut down like a pall between the seer-like eyes of Calhoun and the future was about to be raised upon the first scene of the grand drama whose denouement no mortal could foretell; that the conflict of opinions which had descended from Jefferson and Hamilton to Calhoun and Webster, to Pickens and Fessenden, was now

being debated for the last time as a conflict of opinion between Wigfall and Johnson; and that beyond the Atlantic was no place for ~~them~~^{those}, whose solemn duty and high privilege it was to be where, if other conflict succeeded the conflict of opinion, they could meet their enemy at the gate. ~~He~~^{He} resigned his position as Minister to Russia, came to Washington, settled his accounts with the department, and reached Carolina amid the excitement which prevailed in November, 1860.

The times were darkening, and events, more unmistakable than the fitful beating of the public pulse, proclaimed in tones too audible to be misunderstood, that those who had just been chosen by the people of Carolina to select a fit occupant for the Executive chair, were called upon to make that selection under circumstances more momentous, and at a time more big with fate than had ever fallen to the lot of the representatives of the people. Names of good men and true, of civil and military fame, of national as well as State reputation, were presented, but the loud voice of popular acclaim, on the 16th December, 1860, four days before the State formally sundered the bonds which bound her to the American Union, wafted the returned minister from Russia into that high office which then required for the discharge

of its herculean duties and responsibilities faculties not second to those which, in times almost as dark and perilous, had vindicated the claims of John Rutledge and Robert Y. Hayne to the same exalted position. How the solemn trust confided to him was executed—how wisely—how firmly—how dauntlessly—with what ceaseless vigilance for the honor and interests of the grand old Commonwealth—with what earnest desire for peace—with what vigorous preparation for war—with what nerve, when honor called for the decisive shot at the “Star of the West”—with what fidelity to the sister States who had allied their fortunes, for better or worse, with South Carolina, who, single-handed and alone, in defence of her principles, had stepped into the fearful arena—is it not written in the record of the eventful two years during which he held the helm of the State of South Carolina? That record can never perish! And whatever may be the fate of South Carolina, the name of Francis Wilkinson Pickens will be forever and aye entwined with the decisive initiatory steps which she took in armed defence of those principles of free government and theories of States rights, for which he had contended with unswerving fidelity from youth to age; for it was his fortune as her Executive chief

to illustrate in action her opinions and creed, at a time and under circumstances which can never be forgotten. The views which Governor Pickens pressed upon the Confederate Government as to the management of its foreign relations, differing so widely from those which the Richmond Cabinet adopted, have not been and perhaps never will be published. Suffice it to say that his views were based upon an attentive study of our diplomatic history; upon the actual condition of the foreign relations of the United States then existing; upon his personal knowledge of the policy of the different powers, partially fore-shadowed by the corps of able ambassadors ever present at the Russian Court, almost the headquarters of the diplomacy of civilization, and upon his profound and enlightened conviction that neither formal recognition nor moral aid could be relied on at an early period of the gigantic struggle between the States from the great powers, whose favorable action was so confidently expected by the Confederate Executive and the people of the South. In his opinion, no considerations based on the diminished supply of that mighty plant "which keeps steam expanding, machinery in motion, and the lightning traversing the wires," or any other material interest likely to be seriously

affected by the war between the States, would be found sufficiently potent, in the brief time so generally supposed, to induce the English or French Cabinet to interfere for the repression of the assaults made by the spirit of the age upon the Chinese wall maintained by the South against the public opinion of the civilized world, the Areopagus of modern times. He thought that a wise direction of the Foreign relations of the Confederate Government would rather seek to interest in its favor those great nations whom a similarity of institutions might admonish that their interests and fate, in that regard, were, to a certain extent, bound up with the South. But *Diis aliter visum*, and when long afterward views somewhat similar to those of Governor Pickens were presented to the Spanish Secretary of Foreign Affairs, it was too late. Mr. Seward had anticipated the Richmond Cabinet. During the administration of Governor Pickens there arose an excited controversy growing out of the continued existence of the convention, the Executive Council and its acts, involving questions as to the nature of sovereignty, the power of the Legislatures calling conventions of the people, and the power of those conventions when called and in existence, which had been discussed in the Nullification

Convention and the Legislatures of that day, about which the doctors of the States Rights party had then differed, which had not been definitely settled, and which now, in the midst of a raging war, awoke and stirred themselves from their Daedal couch. Arguments in favor of the legality of the Council and its acts were ably and elaborately presented by its advocates, and Governor Pickens ably, firmly, and zealously defended his views of the Executive prerogative, and the constitutional partition of powers between the different departments of the government. The voice of the people, as evinced in the fall elections of 1862, and the acts of the Legislature then elected, was averse to what they regarded as an "*imperium in imperio*." But the action of the convention, providing for the dissolution of itself and the council, soon withdrew the question from the domain of practical to that of speculative politics, and all excitement on the subject ceased. As a practical question, it seems not probable that it will speedily be resurrected again; as a speculative question "*sub judice lis est*," and is likely so to remain.

F Governor Pickens, at the expiration of his term of office, retired to private life, after two years of excitement which would have tried nerves of iron. From

this retirement he emerged but once again into public view as a member of the Convention of 1865, called by Provisional Governor Perry, under President Johnson's reconstruction programme.¶ He took a prominent part in the debates on some of the leading provisions of the constitution then adopted, and consistent and logical in his States Rights theories and principles to the last, moved and carried an ordinance for the repeal of the Secession ordinance of 1860—the repeal affirming the past validity of that which is repealed.

After his retirement, he returned, with the heartiness of a boy let free from school, to agricultural pursuits, the favorite occupation of the Carolina gentleman, for which he ever had a passion, but from which the toils of public life had long debarred him, and he enjoyed to the last (what many who have held high public station have not been so fortunate as to possess), the esteem, respect, and affection of his neighbors, and unbounded popularity among the people of his own district; a popularity based upon their regard as well for his pure character and moral worth, as his intellectual endowments; for though ever courteous and affable, he contemned the fawning arts which sometimes avail demagogues on the hustings and in popular canvasses, and with high and

low "he bore, without abuse, the grand old name of *gentleman*."

Edgewood, after the long absence of its master, was again thrown open, and became, as in former days, the abode of elegance, refinement, and hospitality; the resort of wit, beauty, and talent; and, even after its master's fortunes were shattered by the disastrous crash with which the Confederate Government and the property of the South fell, it was still to ~~the~~ visitors what it ever had been—what Holland House was to the Whig coterie—the most delightful of houses. The serpentine avenues and the pleasant grounds, the house over whose doors might have been inscribed, as over Earl Cowper's, "*tutum est*," the library, the paintings, the works of art, still remain.

The graceful and accomplished mistress who presided over all this lovely scene, and whose smile was wont in happier days to light up as with magic the long galleries and dusky corridors, still remains—chastened, and in her widow's weeds. But the cordial grasp of the hand with which the master of the house greeted his guest, his genial welcome which combined courtly hospitality with rural abandon, his "kindness far more admirable than grace," which put the humblest visitor at his ease—these are no longer

there ; for that master to whom these belonged, after a long and lingering illness, cheered by all the consolations of the Christian religion, sleeps quietly in the village churchyard. He has left “no son of his succeeding” to perpetuate his name, but he has left contributions to debates on great occasions, speeches on vital subjects, striking addresses, and important messages, the collection and publication of which would be his fittest memorial. It is due to history, to the State, and to him. And independent of what editors, biographers, and collectors may do for his future fame, he has left much which is indissolubly entwined with the most exciting passages in the history of South Carolina. And what can never be forgotten,

“To her young sons, the model of a life
 Mild in its calm, majestic in its strife ;
 To her rich history, blocks of purest ore—
 To her grand blazon, one proud quartering more.”

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